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SUBJECT: ARMENIA PRESS REACTION: VISIT OF RUSSIAN
FOREIGN MINISTER LAVROV

SUMMARY

1. Although Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's 22-hour visit to Yerevan February 16-17 was standard fare, it generated intense press interest. Oppositionist media used the FM's presence to decry Armenia's dependence on Russia, while official and pro-government press praised Armenia's close ties with Russia and the productive nature of the visit. A verbal stumble by Lavrov shortly after deplaning fueled conspiracy theories about Russian actions in Georgia. The following is a sample of editorial comment during the trip. End Summary.

"OUTPOST" ARMENIA

2. Critical comment on FM Lavrov's visit was framed by Speaker of the Russian Duma Boris Gryzlov's statement last December, calling Armenia Russia's "outpost" in the Caucasus. IRUVUNK, a popular anti-government newspaper, commented February 18, "Our officials call Russian politicians strategic partners, yet it seems that Russia does not treat us as partners. Let's remember the Russian Foreign Minister considers (Armenia) an outpost."

3. ARAVOT, an oppositionist daily, wrote on February 17, "We were described as an 'outpost' of Russia and we were very delighted; until Aliyev (the President of Azerbaijan) suggested that there is no reason for an independent state to be delighted at such a statement."

ARMENIAN FM "OBEDIENT YOUNGER BROTHER"

4. The oppositionist press lampooned Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian as Lavrov's inferior, much quoting his admission that he knew less about the Nagorno Karabakh negotiation process than the Russian FM. HAYKAKAN ZHAMANAK, a sensationalist opposition newspaper, wrote February 18, "It seems clear why Lavrov doesn't want to pay a full two-day visit to Armenia. When the two foreign ministers started speaking about the Karabakh issue, Oskanian said, 'We introduced our position to Mr. Lavrov, but Lavrov is the person who knows more about this issue than me,' comfortably placing himself in the role of obedient younger brother or 'outpost'."

5. ARAVOT commented the same day, "Though there were no questions about the infamous 'outpost'. anyone who saw the whole staff of the Armenian Foreign Ministry purposefully running around Lavrov and his delegation could immediately determine that we are indeed their 'outpost'."

6. AYB-FE, a weekly newspaper printed by the oppositionist A1+ media group, added, "Oskanian was successfully doing the job of (Lavrov's) spokesman, doing little more than deciding which journalists should ask questions."

PRO-GOVERNMENT PRESS HIGHLIGHT POSITIVE

7. Armenia's pro-government press, which constitutes the majority, focused on the trip's positive moments while refraining from comment on controversial topics. For example, on February 17, newspapers such as HAYASTANI HANRAPETUTIUN, RESPUBLIKA ARMENIA, and HAYOTS ASHKAR featured Lavrov's statement, "There are no problems in our relations. We expect a very busy year in our partnership."

LAVROV'S ZHVANIA STUMBLE

18. Three prominent TV stations, HAYKAKAN ZHAMANAK, and AZG, a centrist daily newspaper, reported FM Lavrov's verbal miscue shortly after deplaning. During an airport press availability, Lavrov responded to a question about recent events in Georgia by saying, "Do you mean the situation after the killing of (Georgian Prime Minister) Zhvania..after Zhavnia's death?" (Note: The sensationalist press in Armenia championed the rumor that PM Zhvania's 'accidental' asphyxiation was really a Russia-backed assassination. End Note.) Lavrov's verbal stumble was not reported in the pro-government press.

EVANS